

Missouri AHEC: Enhancing Access to Health Care

Are you familiar with your local AHEC? Most individuals aren't, but should be. If you are thinking, "What the HECK is AHEC?", you are not alone! The Missouri Area Health Education Centers, (MAHEC), is one of Missouri's best kept secrets to increasing access to health care and yet it has been around for twenty years.

The MAHEC mission is *to enhance access to quality health care, particularly primary and preventative care, by growing and supporting Missouri's healthcare workforce.* But what does that mean?

By their very nature, AHECs are able to respond in a flexible and creative manner in adapting national health initiatives to the particular needs of our most vulnerable rural communities. AHEC helps to bring the resources of academic medicine to bear in addressing local community health needs. The National AHEC program was developed by Congress in 1971 to recruit, train and retain a health professions workforce committed to underserved populations. Today, 50 AHEC programs with more than 200 centers operate in almost every state and the District of Columbia. Approximately 120 medical schools and 600 nursing and allied health schools work collaboratively with AHECs to improve health for underserved and under-represented populations. Through community-based interdisciplinary training programs, AHECs identify, motivate, recruit, train, and retain a health care workforce committed to underserved populations.

In 1988, the Missouri AHEC (MAHEC) began in Kirksville, Missouri at the Kirksville College of Osteopathic Medicine (KCOM), a private single-discipline, rural osteopathic medical school. Starting from a regionally focused 27-county project directed by KCOM, the MAHEC has grown into a statewide system involving three cooperating medical schools and numerous other health professions schools and serving all 114 of Missouri's counties.

MAHEC youth recruitment efforts are designed to expose students to the world of health careers. Consistent with our mission, MAHEC provides school-based health career orientations and community-based activities for students of various ages. Structured job shadowing, career counseling, academic enrichment and health-related educational opportunities nurture early interest through exciting, age-appropriate activities. One-on-one programming is offered to a select group of high school and undergraduate students actively pursuing primary care health careers via the ACES pipeline.

Designed for high school students interested in pursuing a career in primary care medicine, nursing or dentistry, the **AHEC Career Enhancement Scholars (ACES)** program develops one-on-one relationships between MAHEC high school students, their parents and communities to create a comprehensive pipeline, funneling students into primary healthcare careers. Supported by the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services' Primary Care Resource Initiative for Missouri (PRIMO), this program is geared to students in grades 9-12 who display a strong interest in pursuing a career in primary care; minority students and those from medically underserved populations; first generation college students; and students from socio-economically disadvantaged families. The ACES Program benefits PRIMO Scholars by: *(1) Providing stage appropriate educational enrichment activities; (2) Coordinating local career shadowing opportunities; (3) Activating a regional network of providers and resources; (4) Facilitating school/residency-sanctioned clinical training; and (5) Assisting with job placement in an underserved community.*

MAHEC centers provide **clinical training** experiences for health professions students. Have you ever had a medical visit and first been interviewed by a "student doctor" or "student nurse"? Health professions students are required to spend time in clinical rotations and often do so in the big university hospital settings. But one of MAHEC's goals is to improve the distribution of healthcare professionals to underserved areas, especially rural. Selected health professions students train with current healthcare providers in small communities who volunteer their time to

instruct and mentor in community-based practices. Training in underserved areas, either rural or urban, familiarizes them with the unique needs of an underserved population. This type of training promotes the development of ties and relationships that will draw the student back to a similar community when he or she is ready to practice. Each AHEC regional center collaborates with health professions schools and communities to create and sustain educational environments away from their academic settings. The schools educate students of medicine, nursing, allied health, dentistry, pharmacy, and other health professions. Community partners include hospitals, clinics, public health departments, and individual healthcare providers of all disciplines.

In order to reduce professional isolation that many rural health providers experience, the Mid-Missouri AHEC developed the **MAHEC Digital Library** to provide our rural medical providers with online resources to medical journals and texts, opportunities to complete continuing education without traveling far distances, and opportunities to connect with other health professionals in order to reduce professional isolation. Programs are identified by provider needs or emerging health topics.

The MAHEC Digital Library (MDL) is a collaborative effort between Mid-Missouri AHEC, Phelps County Regional Medical Center, and medical school libraries. Plans include the expansion of access to resources and services throughout the state through subscription by health services, hospitals, and other AHECs in the state

Community Outreach and health education are key to a community's health. MAHEC provides a host of outreach and education activities aimed at improving community health including oral health awareness, chronic disease prevention, stroke awareness, health and wellness, emergency preparedness, environmental safety, and health literacy.

There are seven **MAHEC Regional centers** located across the state in Macon, Rolla, Poplar Bluff, Springfield, St. Joseph, Kansas City and St. Louis. Each center provides its counties with various programs aimed at clinical training of current health professions students, health education for the community, and recruiting students into health careers. Each regional center is comprised of a staff and advisory or governing board of community participants representing health professionals, educators, workforce development, and consumers.

If you know of a student or individual that is interested in a health career, encourage them to speak with their local AHEC. If your school or community group is in need of health education, contact your AHEC. If your local health professional is hosting a student nurse, dentist, or doctor, be confident that they are helping mold that student into a future professional that may possibly return to your community some day. The work of AHEC is all around you. We hope that you will take a longer look at the way AHEC can help make a difference in your community. For more information about AHEC, visit our website at **www.mahec.org**.